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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000281

SIPDIS

NSC ALSO FOR AFRICA DIRECTOR MICHELLE GAVIN

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SUBJECT: GABON: U.S. INTERESTS IN THE POST-BONGO ERA

REF: A. GABON 00271

[B](#). GABON 00276

[C](#). GABON 00278

Classified By: DCM Nathan Holt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#). (C) About a dozen African heads of state, French President Sarkozy, AU Chair Jean Ping and other luminaries are expected in Libreville for Gabonese President Omar Bongo's June 16 state funeral. Drawing on our excellent condolence message, any U.S. delegation should honor Bongo's memory and focus on our key interests going forward. These include peace and stability in Gabon and throughout central Africa; a democratic transition; and continued support for Gabon's continental leadership in environmental preservation.
End Summary.

Heads of State Expected

[2](#). (U) About a dozen African heads of state are expected to attend Gabonese President Omar Bongo's funeral June 16, along with French President Nicolas Sarkozy and delegations from Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Japan will be represented by a former Minister of Justice. Other delegations are being formed. President Denis Sassou-Nguesso (Republic of Congo-Brazzaville) and Francois Bozize (Central African Republic) are already in Gabon. African Union Chair Jean Ping, Bongo's long-serving foreign minister and father of two of his grandchildren is also expected. The Bongo family's wide network includes some in the entertainment world, and the American-Senegalese rap artist Akon was among the mourners who appeared on Gabonese television June 11.

[3](#). (U) A large delegation of family members and others accompanied Bongo's body to Libreville June 11 in an aircraft provided by King Juan Carlos of Spain. Bongo died June 8 in Barcelona.

U.S. Interests

[4](#). (C) Senior Gabonese officials have repeatedly praised the condolence message from President Obama released June 9. The message received prominent play in the Gabonese press. The two themes of the message, Gabon's role in promoting regional peace and stability, and its commitment to environmental protection, resonated particularly well. Those elements remain the cornerstone of U.S. interests in Gabon, and should be amplified by other officials in coming days.

¶5. (U) Gabon faces a difficult transition, with constitutionally-required elections expected within 45 days of Bongo's death. Gabon passed the initial tests, with power transferred to former Senate President Rose Francine Rogombe on June 10 in a ceremony presided over by the President of the Constitutional Court Marie Madeleine Mborantsuo.

¶6. (C) Minister of Defense Ali Bongo, the late president's son, has made it clear he intends to seek the presidency. On June 11 he sent an emissary to the Ambassador and other representatives of "friendly nations" to reiterate what he has been saying publicly: as minister of defense, Ali Bongo is committed to preserving the Gabonese constitution and democratic practices. Others in the current scramble to succeed President Bongo have made similar declarations. Gabon's partners should be firm in encouraging close adherence to the constitution throughout this period.

¶7. (C) Gabon's role in regional peace and security initiatives will decline, but hardly disappear, in a post-Bongo era. Any successor would likely continue Gabon's support for the Libreville-based Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS, French acronym CEEAC), the focus of AU security initiatives in the region. This, too, should be encouraged by international partners. We expect Gabon to work closely with its neighbors on maritime security, also a priority for the U.S. in the Gulf of Guinea region.

¶8. (C) Gabon's leadership in environmental protection likewise deserves continued strong international backing. Bongo's decision to set aside 11 percent of the national

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territory for national parks and preserves, a decision made with specific encouragement from the United States, has no parallel we are aware of on the continent. The preserved environments are irreplaceable and under threat from mineral and petroleum development. Gabon's forests, both protected and otherwise, form a critical part of the Congo Basin forest complex, second only to the Amazon in its size and importance in mitigating the effects of climate change. Gabon is also active in international climate change talks as a responsible voice for the Congo Basin countries.

Political Transition Underway

¶9. (U) The constitutional mechanics of transition in Gabon are relatively straightforward: interim president Rogombe has up to 45 days to organize an election. She has full presidential powers until then, but may not stand for election herself, call a referendum, amend the constitution or dismiss parliament. As explained by Constitutional Court president Mborantsuo, that schedule may only be delayed by an act of "force majeure", duly recognized by the Court.

¶10. (C) Typically, "force majeure" refers to war, civil unrest, natural catastrophies and other disasters. Many on the political landscape, however, believe Gabon will need more time to prepare its electoral list and conduct a presidential campaign. Whether the court would recognize these interests as "force majeure" is unknown.

¶11. (C) Allies of Minister of Defense Ali Bongo say they are confident he will win the nomination of the ruling Parti Democratique Gabonais (PDG) and go on to win the election. They admit, however, that Bongo must stitch together an ethnic coalition and overcome significant hostility among elite politicians and the general public to the creation of a Bongo dynasty. Bongo's assiduously cultivated image as a reformer is also at odds with the political dealmaking he must now do to secure power.

¶12. (C) Though Ali Bongo is preparing a presidential

campaign, he is not alone. There are persistent reports of tensions between Ali and his powerful sister Pascaline Bongo, currently chief of staff in the presidency. Opposition leaders have also been conferring in recent days, though at this point it appears unlikely that a consensus opposition candidate will emerge. Less certain is whether the PDG will remain intact if Ali Bongo, or some other candidate, secures the nomination without placating powerful regional and ethnic interests.

Comment

¶13. (C) The pageantry of President Bongo's funeral will be impressive, not least because of the African luminaries likely to assemble. Our focus, however, should be on honoring the positive aspects of Bongo's legacy while and at the same time encouraging Gabon's new leadership to hold a fair election and continue to support key initiatives--environmental protection and regional peace and security--that are at the heart of U.S. interests here. End Comment.
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